

Pinoy Kasi

Rabies law

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Passing almost unnoticed is Republic Act 9482, which was approved by Congress last February and apparently signed into law by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Reading the new law got me thinking about how we've dealt with rabies through the years and why we needed this new law.

When I was in veterinary school more than 30 years ago, my professors always reminded us that the Philippines had the highest death rate in the region for rabies. Later, when I entered public health, I learned of other dubious distinctions the Philippines had—for example, having one of the highest tuberculosis incidence rates not just in the region but in the world.

Through the years, we've managed to shed off some of those dishonorable distinctions, but the high death rate from rabies has remained, even as other countries became rabies-free, or now have just an occasional rare report of one case, usually from wildlife. In the Philippines, we would have one rabid dog going on a rampage, biting humans as well as other dogs to create an outbreak. Sometimes there'd be an outbreak after humans would butcher and eat a rabid dog.

The stories of “survivors,” saved by garlic or “tandok” (suction, using carabao horn or animal bone) are all legends: If you “survived” a dog bite, it was because the dog was not rabid in the first place. The rabies virus allows no survivors, and the victim dies a slow, horrible death.

Rabies reminds us that fear tactics have very limited value in health education. Television shows have featured rabies victims many times, showing how they suffer and yet, Filipinos remain complacent about the risks from rabies—pet dogs are left unvaccinated and roaming the streets.

Even in my student days, we already had extension work where we would visit communities and offer free vaccination. People would sit and watch us, many unwilling to catch and restrain their own “pets.” The vaccination campaigns became a form of weekend entertainment, a dog rodeo of sorts as we chased after the dogs, with the residents cheering us on and cracking jokes like “Can you vaccinate my rabid husband (‘ang ulol kong mister’)?”

We ran around, almost as if we ourselves were rabid, with these long poles that looked like a “sungkit”—a pole for harvesting fruits from a tree—with a loop at the end. The trick was to get the loop over the dog’s muzzle and to pull on a wire to tighten it. You then ran to the dog, wrestled it down, and then jabbed the needle. At the end of the day, we would collapse like troops coming in from battle, reporting our battle wounds, scratches, bruises, shallow wounds from being snapped at, deeper wounds from getting bitten, even needle jabs. We ourselves were actually all vaccinated against rabies—it was expensive, but necessary, an occupational hazard.

RA 9482 provides for a multi-agency approach to rabies control. The Department of Agriculture (presumably through the Bureau of Animal Industry) has the lead role providing, among other measures, free anti-rabies vaccination of dogs, creating an animal rabies surveillance system, strengthening education and conducting research.

The Department of Health takes care of the humans, providing treatment for bite victims, providing vaccinations to veterinarians, laboratory staff and other people with a high risk of exposure to the rabies virus, and again developing a surveillance system for humans.

I like the law’s provision for the Department of Education to strengthen rabies education in the school health curriculum and to assist in mass vaccination campaigns of dogs. We need to make sure the teachers are educated first about what exactly happens in rabies

. The most important message is this: not all dog bites lead to

rabies

. If the attacking dog had no signs of

rabies

, it should not be killed, but placed under observation for 10 to 14 days. The new law also requires that the bite be reported to authorities.

Second important message: There is no cure for rabies. The new law in fact specifies that there should be education about rabies, presumably about its uselessness.

The schools are also supposed to integrate information on “responsible pet ownership,” which I hope will include education about the Animal Welfare Act and prevention of cruelty to animals.

Finally, the local government units are supposed to ensure all dogs are properly immunized, registered and issued an identification tag. There are all kinds of fines in the new law. Pet owners who refuse to put a leash on their dogs when they are brought out of the house will be fined P500. Owners of unregistered dogs will be fined P2,000, and if the dog bites someone, they have to pay for the costs of vaccinating the human victim(s). Pet owners who refuse to have their dog placed under observation after it bites someone will be fined P10,000. A really stubborn pet owner who refuses to have their dog observed, and do not shoulder the medical expenses of someone bitten by their dog will be fined P25,000.

Curiously, there is a fine of P5,000 and imprisonment of one to four years for any person found guilty of trading dog meat, a duplication of the Animal Welfare Act unless here, the intention is to prevent the sale of meat from dogs that had died of rabies.

Unregistered dogs will be impounded and owners will have to pay P500 to P1,000 to get their pets back. Unclaimed dogs will be euthanized. I’m particularly concerned about this point, having seen one town, and heard of other towns with similar cases, where stray dogs were rounded up and beaten to death; in my case, in front of tourists who supposedly needed to be protected. (The tourists said they would never return to that island, and were wondering if they wanted to come back to the Philippines at all.) The new law explicitly states that the Animal Welfare Act must be observed.

There are other important provisions in the law, including provision of spaying and neutering

(sterilization) of dogs, which is essential if we want to control rabies. There are just too many dogs roaming around—and reproducing.

The new law is supposed to be implemented through a budget of P100 million, to come from the budgets of the health, agriculture, local government and education departments. Poypoy (see this Filipino dog's heartwarming [story](#) , written by his human friend, Nice Rodriguez, in Tuesday's Philippine Daily Inquirer) can only hope the money will be made available so the law can be implemented.